

THE RESPONSE

There is a wonderful story about a young man who was dating a very attractive girl. One Sunday after church, the two went for a picnic. The young man had made arrangements to rent a rowboat. His plan was to row to a small island on their favorite lake and enjoy a lunch that he himself had prepared.

Since he had been unaccustomed to making lunches, he had forgotten to pack a number of things. His attractive friend said, "It might be nice if we had some salt, ketchup and napkins." Without hesitation, the young man got into the boat and rowed back to shore to get these missing items.

This routine occurred twice more that afternoon—he rowed back to shore to retrieve items that she requested. By the

end of the extremely warm day, he had perspired so much that his good suit was soaked.

But he realized something that afternoon. He realized there had to be a better way. The young man's name, by the way, was Clarence Evinrude. Later that very evening, he designed the world's first outboard motor because of his experience out on the lake with his young lady. You can say that young Clarence came to this episode in his life by way of the only path he knew to take, and because of the experience he had, he left by another road with an epiphany, and he was changed forever by that one experience.

This is Epiphany Sunday were we hear the story of the Magi: these foreign astrologers, advisors to kings, and learned in the ways of the heavens and earth. In this time of

history, 98% of humanity was illiterate and highly superstitious. So these Magi and people like them who could read and write were the experts, they were trusted the world over, and paid well for their services. They see a star that is of incredible significance to them; a great King has been born in Israel; and so they use the only path they know...to Jerusalem...in order to pay homage before the new king. Homage is something you did before kings and queens, kneeling or lying on the floor in humble submission and becoming the King's servant forever.

Therefore, one may think that these Magi were possibly trying to procure a new client, a new king which to advise. So when they finally got to Jerusalem, they were very confused when they discovered that the positions of king

and advisors were already filled. But as Magi, they were the experts, and their story about a star and a great king born in the last year or so could not be dismissed, King Herod had no choice but to believe them, so he sent them to find this new king.

But when the Magi got to the house, where Jesus, Mary and Joseph were living in Bethlehem, I believe the Magi had an experience that changed their life forever. They came by one road with a mission and a purpose to pay homage to a great king, and they ended up kneeling before the Son of God! Therefore, when they left the house, they left by a different road, a new way that God gave them. They had an epiphany, a realization of something incredibly profound and life changing. Once you have an epiphany moment, you can

never go back to what you were before; you can never use the same road again.

Just like Clarence Evinrude and the Magi, we too come to the throne of God by different roads and purposes or motives. Some people come to prayer, worship by way of a tragic road... something heartbreaking has happened in their life, and now they come to the throne of God for healing.

Many come to God because they have been taught that it is their duty as good Americans to go to church, pray and read their Bible every day, and live decently and morally. There are some people who come to the throne of God in prayer and worship because they are seeking a purpose and direction in life...some deep meaning to the daily grind.

Finally, there are a handful of people whose motives are

solely to come and pay homage to Christ Jesus, and give their lives to His service.

There are many diverse paths that lead us to the throne of God in prayer and worship. Yet if we are open to the experience of encountering Christ the King, who always present with us, then we will be changed! When we come face to face with the Holy, our lives are changed forever in an epiphany, and we can never go back to the same road we've always traveled. We leave by another road, a road that God chooses for us, a road that leads to the home we've been seeking all our lives.

The story of the Magi is a great story, but not just a story immortalized in statues and nativity scenes all over the world, but it is our story as Christians.

Our story is about seeking...perhaps for years. Our story is about finding and discovering Emmanuel, God with us from the beginning of our existence, even though we didn't realize it fully. And in the uncovering of our hearts and minds to the Risen Christ with us this morning, as we pay homage to the King of the Universe and pledge our whole lives to His service, we remember that Christ gave up his life for us first. We do not pay homage to God who is far away and lifted above our human life of suffering and joys, but through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus God is again imminently near to us.

God is near to us when we don't realize God is there, God is near to us when our eyes are uncovered and we fall on our knees before Him in confession and pledge our lives to

Christ. And God is near to us when we are called to travel another road following after Jesus who is our Lord and King.

The Church calls this understanding that God draws near to us...grace. John Wesley who founded the Methodist Church called this story of Christianity prevenient grace where God is with us even when we don't realize it; justifying grace where our eyes are uncovered and we encounter God's love for us face to face...and we are changed forever; and sanctifying grace where God puts us on a new road of righteousness and holiness...or in other words faith and loving works...or piety and Christian action...or loving God and loving neighbor. By God's grace we have been saved, we are being saved at this moment, and we will be saved unto eternal life.

For weeks now, I've been preaching this sermon series called "Signs", every bulletin has had little signs with a word printed on them. In September, when I read the scriptures for advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, I heard God plainly speak about His signs of love, like the star in the story of the Magi, which leads us to encounter Jesus. In that encounter we are changed; and we leave this place by a different road with an epiphany, our eyes are opened and we can never be the same again.

This is my prayer for you this New Year, that you will be changed by God's grace and leave by a different road. I pray that by encountering the Risen Christ today, 2011 will not be just another year for you, but a year where you are drawn closer to Christ, where the obstacles that keep you

apart from Jesus are finally removed, and you respond to the love of God poured out in you. This is my prayer, this is God's grace calling you and me this morning, this is the moment of epiphany, the moment of salvation, and we will never be the same again. Amen.